



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE PROGRESS OF RELIGIOUS THOUGHT DURING THE VICTORIAN REIGN ¹.

THE title of this paper was not entirely approved by myself, although I was not quite irresponsible for the choice of it. The tendency of the present time to sum up great questions within very limited compass is a dangerous one. Moreover, the temptation which the circumstances of this year offer alike to readers and writers only increases the danger. We have reached a turning point in the history of England, which is suggestive of the most fascinating analyses of all the thoughts, the words, and deeds, which have occupied the subjects of Her Majesty during the sixty years of her wonderful reign.

The progress of religious thought during these sixty years has not been so considerable or so rapid as it may be the fashion to profess. After all, the changes which have taken place have been mainly confined to the personal influence of some small group of individuals. On the other hand, large elements of change which have come to pass cannot be considered to have been in the direction of progress at all. And some movements which belong to the epoch have been both retrogressive and progressive at the same time. The Tractarian Movement at Oxford has left these double traces on the mind of England, the growth and development of the High Church party have undoubtedly stimulated religious thought, and it has not been without its intellectual influence also. At the same time it

¹ A paper read before the Jewish Literary and Historical Society at Bradford, on Sunday, May 30, 1897.

has given a new lease and fresh encouragement to natural tendencies towards superstition. Furthermore, under the immediate wing of Ritualism in its early days, there was a new impetus imparted to the spirit of intolerance. The Roman Catholic Church has made even greater progress than the Anglican and perhaps with less mischief to itself. There has grown up within the Church of Rome in this country more breadth of view than it contained formerly. This has been mainly owing to the Tractarian Movement, which imported into the Roman Church so many of the best educated men from the Church of England. The accession by the Catholic Church of such people as the Oriel Fathers—Newman, Manning, Wilberforce, and Ward, as well as a host of others of slightly later date, gave to that organization just what it had previously lacked—the spirit of the then modern University life—for the Roman Catholic clergy were not trained at Oxford and Cambridge.

Within the Church of England itself, the changes that have occurred are very remarkable indeed; but as I have just observed, it is not all those changes which can be said to have contributed to the progress of thought. We had to wait for a somewhat advanced period in the present reign before we reached the time when the Church really broadened out and manifested its power of surviving and of fructifying under conditions which at the beginning of the reign would have been imagined to be fatal to it.

The other day I was speaking to an octogenarian, who is a man of great distinction in the scientific world. And he made two remarks to me which are suggestive in connexion with the subject of this paper. "The sixty years of this reign," he said, "just cover the period during which I have been able to think for myself. When the Queen came to the throne I was twenty. In those days the Bible was taken literally and swallowed whole. Nobody ventured to question anything which it contained."

Now if I were asked to sum up the actual progress which religious thought has made in these sixty years,

I would say that it has enabled religious people to transfer the seat of authority in religious matters from a condition of bibliolatry to one of natural religion. Formerly it was believed quite simply and honestly that the eternal truths of religion actually rested upon particular interpretations of biblical narratives. The Bible was considered as the book which literally and exclusively contained the Word of God. And that Word of God was supposed to have confined itself within the limits of the two covers of the Bible. It was actually thought that God had fully and finally revealed himself to mankind at a stage in human history prior to the period of the world's adolescence. The altered attitude of religious people among the educated classes in regard to the interpretation of the Bible is far more important than it may appear. Progress in religious thought is a constructive process and not a destructive one. The views which are now held in regard to the Bible among religious persons who are also very thoughtful, differ considerably from what was formerly believed. But this change is not, as some uncritical people imagine, in a direction which is hostile to the Bible. Quite the contrary. The Bible is much more than it was because we understand it better. The popular notions which were held both by Jews and Christians in regard to the Bible was harmful both to the Bible itself and to the true cause of religion. Religion is either of vital consequence to human nature or it is a mere word without any practical meaning. Jews and Christians all agreed that religion was a vital matter; but they were unwise enough to contend that this vital matter was dependent upon something else which was necessarily uncertain, doubtful, susceptible of many meanings. I will give a simple illustration. I have known persons in my youth, who actually thought that the authority of the Ten Commandments rested upon the supposed miracle which is described in the nineteenth chapter of Exodus and which is said to have attended the circumstances of their being

written. The logical consequence was that there was a danger of these Ten Commandments losing their authority and their claim upon the human conscience the moment it was suggested that the miracle was improbable.

Again, Christians have imagined that the natural belief in a life after death was dependent upon the supposed miracle of the bodily resurrection of Christ. So that in this case the moment bodily resurrection was thought to be improbable, people were expected to part with their belief in a future state.

It seems almost incredible to some of us now, that ideas which are so sacred and in many instances so essential to personal happiness, should be regarded as being dependent upon anything else which is at all questionable. I remember hearing the ridiculous assertion that Christ must have been either the Incarnate God or an impostor. It is now perceived that there is another alternative to the hypothesis of his divinity, and that he might have been, while quite human, the greatest living example of spiritual and religious manhood. It is difficult to say which band of religionists has fallen into the most grotesque extravagances in regard to the claims they put forth on behalf of miracles. The great lesson which the present generation has learnt is that whether miracles in the ordinary sense have ever taken place or have never taken place, the deepest truths of religion and the permanent principles of ethics are entirely and absolutely independent of the question. To prove nowadays that a given miracle did not take place, does not disprove a single religious idea which is of any value. The fact of disproving a miracle has no other effect than to dispel some fond illusion or to remove a superstition. This is the greatest achievement in the progress of religious thought which our era has accomplished.

It may not be easy to trace this change or development to any specific cause. Perhaps it is mainly due to the natural progress of human intelligence and to a Divine

Providence which watches over mankind. At the same time it is not difficult for a student of religious and philosophic literature to single out the men whose influence has been most potent in the direction indicated within the period with which we are now dealing. I should be sorry to think that the number of those vigorous and highly gifted leaders of thought are confined to one or two. At the same time there can be very little doubt that in this particular work of emancipating the religious mind from false theories of religion, and of disentangling it from the confusion of past ages, there stands out in the Victorian era two names of unsurpassed influence, both intellectual and religious at the same time. I refer to James Martineau and Benjamin Jowett. These two eminent leaders of thought have, in my judgment, done more for the progress of religious thought during the Victorian reign than any others. And I do not hesitate to make this assertion with a full consciousness of the services which have been rendered in the same cause by three contemporaries of theirs, namely the late Bishop Colenso, Dean Stanley, and M. Renan. But Martineau and Jowett have done more than any to place religion on a rational basis.

The great Unitarian divine, James Martineau, who of the five I have mentioned is the only one living—now in his ninety-third year—has occupied a position of extraordinary spiritual force in this country. There probably has never lived a man of more profound piety and saintliness of life than he. As a preacher he stood alone in the combination of qualities which most strongly appeal to highly educated minds. He possesses a literary grace and a philosophic insight which will always enshrine his name among the very princes of English letters. His deep learning and singular mental grasp place him among the foremost intellects of his age. The work of his life has been a steady march of thought on the highest planes of religious culture, ever ascending to loftier pinnacles in the double province of intellectual and spiritual aspiration.

If we judge him from his volumes, *Types of Ethical Theory* or his *Study of Religion*, or his numerous sermons published under the titles of *Endeavours after the Christian Life* and *Hours of Thought*, we cannot escape the conclusion that this thinker has touched the deepest chords in the religious and intellectual susceptibilities of scholars, students, and men of thought. Perhaps his latest work, published when he was over eighty years of age, was the crown of his career—*The Seat of Authority in Religion*. It is an exhaustive and remarkable analysis of those different centres of authority in which religionists have from time to time reposed their confidence. The Catholic Church, and the belief in miracles both of the Old and the New Testament, are examined and dismissed as being inadequate for the great purpose of leaning upon as the props of religious life and trust. The ultimate seat of authority which he discovers to be unassailable is in the human conscience. The great power of Martineau's teaching, as of Jowett's (of whom I shall speak presently), includes something which is distinct from the school of biblical critics in Germany. The Higher Criticism in England has been generally conducted in a way which has not weakened the hold which the Bible makes upon the literary as well as the religious imagination of the reading and thinking world. In Germany I suppose it would be true to say that the Bible has been somewhat detached from the place which it occupied in pre-critical days. Now in England, on the contrary, the authority of the Bible—both as a body of literature and as a manual of religion, has rather gained than lost in consequence of the Higher Criticism. To those men who owe their religious and literary stimulus to the influence and teaching of such men as Martineau and Jowett, the Bible has not become of less value, but rather of greater value, since they have learnt to consider the interpretation and the criticism of it by the same methods with which they interpret or criticize other books. The stories of the Creation in the early chapters of Genesis

have lost nothing in their impressiveness—in their stately literary simplicity and in their inherent spiritual beauty—because the narrative has passed out of the sphere of history and entered into that of folk-lore. A story which contains any element whatever of philosophical truth or of literary merit does not sink into insignificance when the perception of it passes from the region of historic record into one of fiction. A myth may have in it all the stirring qualities of a true story, so long as it contains the elements of permanent abstract truth. To the modern disciple of a Martineau or a Jowett the Ten Commandments would gain nothing if we were to attempt to add to their intrinsic value a belief that they were spoken amidst thunder and lightning and thick darkness and trumpet sounds. We can understand that such associations did not unnaturally gather around the tradition in respect to them. And having gathered in the minds of a highly imaginative people who were yet in a state of archaic civilization, it was not unfitting or extraordinary in any way that these traditions should have been written down in the very documents which contained the imperishable code itself. No words of mine can so fitly express the independence of the religious idea of the belief in miracles and of bibliolatry than those memorable words spoken by Martineau at the opening of the Unitarian College at Oxford in October, 1893. With your permission, therefore, I will here quote them :—

Is there then, you may perhaps ask, nothing permanent in the contents of religious faith? Yes, of religious faith, even though you should pass from church to church, and your assent should shift from creed to creed. For the abiding element is to be found, not in the intellect's theoretical conception of things divine, but in the order, depth, and power of the moral and spiritual affections, and in the adoring and living sense of an infinite Personal relation in which they place us. All the time that the understanding may be on the move in its escape from imperfections, the responsible and aspiring soul may for ever kneel before the eternally Perfect. The reverential conscience, the trustful love, the self-devoting will

may abide the same through all theological research; and be ready to take possession of whatever universe and whatever history that research may lay open to them as the temple of their worship and epic of Divine Life. Be the scale small or great of the scene thus filled with God, the religion which so consecrates it is the same, and makes a fellowship of heart for the child, the peasant, and the philosopher. This it is that carries faithful minds unharmed through changes which frighten people helplessly resting on crumbling authorities. What "destructive criticism," they say, "is this!" "What is to become of the Sabbath if the six days' Creation is given up? And of the Fall of Man, if we listen to Darwin? And of the Redemption, if we lose the Fall?" Not only is it true that criticism destroys these things as facts, but that, unless it did so, we should be still in the stage of Accadian civilization; imagining the universe to ourselves as a two-storied world divided by a Crystal-palace roof studded with electric lamps and an arc-light or two over the portals of the day and night; its ceiling supplied with water-tanks and turncocks to irrigate the flower-beds and fill the fish-ponds below! Of this lower plane we should be thinking as the scene of an abortive experiment of a new creature; who, though said to be in the image of God, proved to be so great a simpleton as to break down at the first temptation, and so become the progenitor of a fore-doomed race peopling a ruined world; which, at the end of the ages, had to be bought off at a frightful cost of suffering to the Holiest of all. If criticism is "destructive" of this picture, does it not spread before us a more sublime? If it dwarfs the Mosaic Chronology, does it not unfold a record that has neither Alpha nor Omega? If it does away with the flat sea and rooted earth "that cannot be moved," does it not roll them into a globe and fling it spinning and circling on a track from which it never swerves? If it melts away the crystal roof, think whither it is that it lets the stars retire! Suppose what we now know of our abode and our environment were to open suddenly upon a devout worshipper looking out on the little Hebrew universe. Nay, let it be Jesus of Nazareth himself, when he had gone up into the mountain to remain all night in prayer to God; and if then had been revealed to him all that comes to us from the vault of stars above him, and the dip of the horizon below; if the moon had told him her wondrous tale, and the light of Orion and Pleiades had reported its length of way, and what infinitudes it left behind; if, in short, between the second watch and third of that night, he had found himself transported from the built firmament of Genesis to the open universe of Newton and Herschel; do you think that he would have knelt no more? That he would have shut up his

spoken or silent prayer, because there was no longer anything adorable? Would he not rather have been lifted into a devotion too rapturous for speech? And so it ever is with all our warranted "negations." We discard the relatively mean and low to escape into the great and glorious: we leave the rudiments to fall away, that we may press on towards perfection. We exchange a God with a "throne" and a "footstool," a "right-hand seat" and a left, for the Living Presence of a Universal Mind, looking into our eyes in all that is beautiful, and communing with us in all that is right.

Such may be regarded as an epitome of the teaching of the greatest non-Jewish unitarian of this century. The passage which I have just quoted indicates the real drift of the crowning work of his life, which I have already mentioned, namely, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*.

The other great force in the progress of religious thought will be found in the writings of Benjamin Jowett, the great Master of Balliol. He it was who, among the clergy of the Church of England, was the first to perceive the idea of natural religion as distinct from and independent of bibliolatry. In the fifties he had already written the following memorable words in his commentary on St. Paul's epistle to the Romans in the course of his remarkable essay on Natural Religion: "The truth seems to be not that Christianity has lost its power, but that we are seeking to propagate Christianity under circumstances which during the eighteen centuries of its existence it has never yet encountered." This pungent sentence seems to sum up the fact that religion (not only Christianity) must be presented upon a different basis from that upon which it was formerly supposed to rest. Tied down to the words of Scripture, and further hampered by an interpretation of it which was only characteristic of the unscientific spirit of the Middle Ages, the permanent truths of religion must necessarily become obscured. It is only part of the evolution of the human mind that at some time or other it should assert its independence and break its bands asunder. This process does not involve what some German critics have unphilosophically assumed, that is the annihilation

of the religious instincts of human nature. On the contrary, it is rather the assertion of those instincts which in the Balliol school of thought has created this revolution. This seems the true spiritual and intellectual diagnosis of the condition of thought which induced Jowett to write the following criticism in 1859 of the Christian doctrine of the Atonement:—

The doctrine of the Atonement has often been explained in a way at which our moral feelings revolt. God is represented as angry with us for what we never did: he is ready to inflict a disproportionate punishment on us for what we are; he is satisfied with the sufferings of his Son in our stead. The sin of Adam is first imputed to us; then the righteousness of Christ. The imperfection of human law is transferred to the divine: or rather a figment of law which has no real existence. The death of Christ is also explained by the analogy of the ancient rite of Sacrifice. He is a victim laid upon the altar to appease the wrath of God. The institutions and ceremonies of the Mosaical religion are applied to him. He is further said to bear the infinite punishment of infinite sin. When he had suffered or paid the penalty, God is described as granting him the salvation of mankind in return.

I shall endeavour to show, (1) that these conceptions of the work of Christ have no foundation in Scripture; (2) that their growth may be traced in ecclesiastical history; (3) that the only sacrifice, atonement, or satisfaction with which the Christian has to do, is a moral and spiritual one; not the pouring out of blood upon the earth, but the living sacrifice "to do thy will, O God"; in which the believer has part as well as his Lord; about the meaning of which there can be no more question in our day than there was in the first ages.

Jowett's biographers, Professor Lewis Campbell and Mr. Evelyn Abbott, have well focussed the picture of his life and teaching. Jowett's philosophy, as they have pointed out, had not developed a particular system of philosophy such as had Spinoza, or Hegel, or Kant, and the rest of them. But he brought a philosophical spirit to bear upon the whole problem of religious life and belief. One vital work with which the name of the great Master of Balliol will always be associated was the impetus and the method which he gave to the interpretation not only

of the sacred canon of the Old Testament and of the New Testament, but also to the great classical writings of ancient Greece to which he devoted his labours. And this reference leads me to make one more reflection in regard to the part which Jowett has played in the progress of religious thought in our time. He has—so to speak—emancipated religion from the trammels of bibliolatry. Formerly—and not so long ago—even within the recollection of many of us who are only in the prime of life, it was supposed that the truths of religion, which are permanent if they are true, depended in some mysterious way upon particular views or attitudes in relation to the Bible. It was imagined that a belief in the historic accuracy of miracles recorded in the Scriptures was the foundation or basis of religious faith. The result was that the moment a person came to the conclusion that the evidence of miracles—that is sudden interruptions of the course of nature—mentioned in the Bible, was seen to be inadequate in establishing an alleged miraculous fact, the value of the Bible as a religious text-book was undermined and religion for that individual was shaken at its very base. We now know and are becoming every day more sensible, that the essential truths of religion are independent of these alleged miracles or of any particular interpretation of Scripture. And at the same time we learn that those who do not believe in miracles do not necessarily lose their reverence for the Bible as a religious text-book. Even the theory of inspiration or revelation is not destroyed because what was once considered to be a miracle comes to be regarded only as a myth. Many religious and devout spirits in our generation do not believe in miracles at all. They have *prima facie* objections to the proposition that any miracle was necessary to establish a religious idea. And the Bible has lost nothing for such people. Indeed it has rather gained in authority for them. The Bible is seen to be the result rather than the cause of the religious idea in the mind of man. It gains in divine authority the more we

recognize the human hand in it. This is a view which was not very prevalent before the time of Jowett. He has done a great deal to bring it about. And he has been followed in quick succession by other distinguished scholars and thinkers, who have come under his immediate personal influence. The late Thomas Hill Green, of Balliol College, who was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, a man of genius, who thought and wrote in a method of his own, was one of the most religious men who ever lived. He entirely repudiated the idea of miracles.

There is another branch of this subject to which it seems necessary to refer, though it is only possible on this occasion to do so very meagrely. The present generation has emancipated itself from the wildest illusions that ever entered into the human mind. In former days it was imagined that God had only revealed himself in a Book. And every fresh discovery which was brought to us from the labourers in the field of natural science, was supposed to be an assault on the religious idea. Men of science were imagined to be the enemies of religion. And so obstinately was this notion persisted in, that scientific men themselves seemed to think that whatever they were doing in their researches, was in antagonism to the efforts of religious people. About seventeen years ago, writing on this subject to a distinguished friend and an eminent Anglican divine, the late Canon Liddon, I was struck with the views which he wrote to me, and which seemed to be unusually enlightened :—

“As to the physical sciences,” Dr. Liddon wrote, “I daresay that religious people often use ill-considered and inaccurate language, to say no more. Nature is God’s first revelation of himself; and his servants can have no quarrel with any true interpretation of it. I suppose that the feature in modern physical theories which provokes religious men, is the assumption, so often made, that there is no real knowledge except that which depends on observation and experiment.”

There is probably at the present time no religious person of more than moderate intelligence who regards science as

being opposed to religion. And the greatest men of science have given up the supposition that their work conflicts with the higher truths of religion. Moreover, many devoted Jews and Christians have accepted the theory of evolution and have gone so far as to confess that the theory extends its operations to the sphere of religion itself. The late Professor Huxley expressed his ardent appreciation of the religious ideal of the Hebrew prophet, which he said could never be undermined by any scientific discovery, namely "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God."

Both in the field of biblical interpretation and in the relation between science and religion, the progress of thought has been considerable.

Of course it may be said in respect to the consideration of religious progress in thought, that it has been limited to a few exponents of religion. That the great mass of the population are still addicted to notions which are crude, superstitious and unprogressive. But it must be remembered that in all spheres of human progress, the landmarks of advance are to be noted by the points which are reached by individual leaders of thought, rather than the condition of multitudes. It is necessary to remember always that the most cultivated minds in whom progress invariably originates, are necessarily in advance of their fellow men who follow gradually, slowly and at some distance—but follow they inevitably will. On the other hand, even among the general population throughout England, there is much less intolerance than formerly. There is a growing disposition among different religious sects to recognize what they have in common, and to be less engaged than they used to be with the sense of things which differentiate them.

One sign of the progress of thought is the growing desire to make Sunday a brighter day than it used to be—to combine with religious exercise the cultivation of other high instincts of humanity which are akin to those of religion—the one helping forward the other. Thus the

opening of National Museums and Picture Galleries, and the increased facilities for enjoying good music for multitudes who had little opportunity of doing so when these resources were tabooed and disallowed on the Sunday. All these things point to a progress among the mass of Englishmen themselves, if for no other reason than the tendency it creates to expand the mind and to promote what may be termed the cultivation of the national intelligence and general breadth of view.

With these remarks, it is necessary to leave this brief and imperfect survey of a subject which is large and complex enough to fill a volume. I trust, however, that I have not wholly failed to convey some idea of the direction in which we may look for the evidence of religious progress during the reign of Queen Victoria.

One reflection more. In the case of a constitutional monarchy like our own, it is no easy matter to define precisely the extent or the limit which the personal influence of the Sovereign has exercised over the nation in matters of social and religious progress. But just because it is a constitutional monarchy and that the functions of the reigning Head of our State are limited, we have in our Monarch the figure of one who is distinctly a social leader. The influence of our noble and beloved Queen has been not only a pure one in the religious sense, but it has been characterized by all those attributes which are distinctive of lofty personal culture as well as of a high civilization. The Queen, whilst scrupulously conscientious in her duties as the hereditary Head of the Church of England, has missed no opportunity of setting an example of great liberality. She has cultivated friendships among the representatives of many diverse schools of thought, and not one of her subjects has rejoiced more than she herself in the great triumph which has been achieved within her reign for the cause of absolute religious liberty.

OSWALD JOHN SIMON.